



Role of Elders

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The role of First Nations' Elders is best shared through the words of the Elders themselves. The following accounts should not be taken to be definitive. The limitations of the English language do not capture the richness of the role and nature of First Nations' Elders. The limitations of the English language cannot express the spiritual understandings and sacredness of an Elder blessed with the ancient knowledge of the First Nations. Elder Jim Kanipitetew's following statement captures part of the essence of this topic:

"We will not be able to live with our elders forever. We will be walking towards a good life together as Indians if we remain good friends. Where ever we meet, we should shake hands. It is a blessing to me to be here at my nephew's today as he works hard for understanding and follows what the elders say. An elder used to live in the middle of the circle of tents, if he was a brave and honest man. He had beliefs that his people could depend on: the four corners of the world, the Creator, the spirits and the spiritual structure. They were to pray every day to maintain these things. If a brave was a good man who did a noble deed, he was honoured. In return, he prayed to the Creator and asked for blessing from the creative spirits. Having done this, this brave would be asked by his people to pray and give a blessing at important events of his people like councils or ceremonials. Women did the same as this. The brave women also followed the belief of the oldest and strongest spiritual woman. These women were blessed by the Almighty to study womanhood and to bless and look upon all people. An elder doesn't think of himself as better than anyone else when he or she speaks like this. It's only the elders who have long since gone that speaks through them. It's an echo of a wonderful life long ago. One thing the Creator had said, He said that, "You, my people, will be poor, but I will send the good old sun to comfort and watch over you. It will light your way even on water, as far away as the ocean." Then he asked the rocks to bless the people through his name and also the fire. The fire said, "I will be burning to make heat for the people and I will be there when you wish to burn sweetgrass, or smoke your pipe." The scent of sweetgrass will rise up from the earth people and the Creator will know through this that his blessing is needed, or that someone is sick. So young people, whenever you meet an elder that is just as poor as anybody, shake hands with him, you will be showing that you were lectured well. Love your mother while she is still on this earth. You people have a chance to gain much from the experiences of your parents. Listen to your parents."¹¹² Cree Elder Jim Kanipitetew

All First Nations' individuals learned and followed the many protocols, customs and traditions of their people. Some gifted Elders played a leading role in passing on the customs, laws and traditions of their people. These gifted Elders were:

"... considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture and the teachings of the Great Spirit. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, their humour and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgment. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community."¹¹³

This is the high standard that First Nations' Elders aspire to. An Elder is any person recognized by a First Nations' community as having knowledge and understanding of the traditional culture of the community, including the physical manifestations of the culture of the people and their spiritual and social traditions.¹¹⁴ Knowledge and wisdom, coupled with the recognition and respect of the people of the community, are the essential defining characteristics of an Elder.¹¹⁵ Some Elders have additional attributes, such as those of traditional healer.¹¹⁶

In addition to having led an exceptional life based on the traditions, customs and culture of First Nations, an Elder is expected to have qualities such as:

- i. Will be knowledgeable of First Nations' heritage and history.
- ii. Will be knowledgeable and supportive of traditional First Nations' ceremonies, protocols and songs.
- iii. Possess fluency and competence in a First Nations' language.
- iv. Will be an advocate of traditional leadership, traditional governance and traditional law.
- v. Will be aware and supportive of Treaty rights and history.
- vi. Will acknowledge the diversity of First Nations' cultures, languages and traditions in Saskatchewan.
- vii. Will work to ensure the intergenerational transfer of traditional First Nations' knowledge, history, culture, language and practices to the youth.
- viii. Will support and observe the sacredness of First Nations' traditions, ceremonies, sites and practices.

113 Deborah Chansonneuve, *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People*, Prepared for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005

114 Joseph E. Couture, *Elder/Healer: The Elements of Promise*, Department of Psychology, Athabasca University, Aboriginal Canada Portal website: <http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en/ao26876.html>

115 Ibid

116 Ibid

- ix. Will have an understanding, be supportive and play a leading role in their kinship ties.
- x. Will have a knowledge of First Nations' traditional healing that may include the use of traditional plants used for healing.¹¹⁷

This list is a starting point towards answering the question: Who is an Elder? Each First Nation has a term that defines these wisdom keepers, knowledge keepers, medicine people, healers and ceremonial persons. The term 'Elder' is a contemporary English word commonly used for these individuals. Many of these individuals are not comfortable with this term, as it does not adequately describe their role. Today many First Nations are reverting to the traditional term in their own languages for 'Elder'. Being an 'Elder' is not just about reaching a certain age but includes many of the principles discussed in this book.